



Dhyan Singh 'Chand': Hockey's Magician



Written by Dilip D'Souza | Illustrated by Mohit Suneja

‘Dhyan Singh ‘Chand’: Hockey’s Magician’ by Dilip D’Souza

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PRATHAM BOOKS

621, 2nd Floor, 5th Main, OMBR Layout

Banaswadi, Bengaluru 560 043

T: +91 80 42052574 / 41159009

Regional Office:

New Delhi

T: +91 11 41042483

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Young Dhyan Singh simply loved hockey. As a boy, he and his friends used to cut branches off date palm trees and use them as hockey sticks. Not many know that he actually played for the Army long before he joined the Army. At 14, he accompanied his father to a match between two Army teams. When one team fell behind in the game, Dhyan told his father loudly that if he only had a hockey stick, he would take them to victory. A British army officer sitting nearby scolded Dhyan for boasting, but then gave him a chance to play. True to his word, Dhyan scored four goals. So impressed was the officer that he inducted Dhyan into the 'Bachaa Paltan' or the 'Children's Platoon'.

The story goes that Dhyan liked to practise the game after his daily soldierly duties were done. But of course, it was usually dark then, and this was many years before the coming of floodlights. So Dhyan used to wait to practice till the moon had risen. On full moon nights, when dogs everywhere howl and the trees are bathed in a silvery glow, you might have seen this slim young man with his flashing hockey stick, propelling a ball rapidly across a playing field before slamming it into the goal.

And because Dhyan would wait for the moon, his mates in the Army called him Chand, and the name stuck. Dhyan Chand he was, polishing his skills in the moonlight.



All that hard work paid off for Dhyan. People said he often practised on railway lines, not letting the ball fall off the rail as he ran. That's probably why Dhyan made a name for himself for his superb ball-control in real games; after all, he had learned it the hard way, on the tracks. Time and time again during a game, he would run the whole length of the field, opponents sprawling in his wake, ball stuck like glue to his hockey stick until he sent it smoothly past a helpless goalkeeper into the net. The great runner Milkha Singh once asked Dhyan how he had become so good at his game. Dhyan said he used to hang an empty tyre from the goal, and then hit hundreds of shots every day through the tyre. Dhyan scored heavily, and in the years ahead, he would win plenty of games and medals for India.



But what really became his trademark was this incredible skill with his hockey stick, this ability to control the ball as if there was nobody else on the field. As if he was alone again, practising under the full moon.

But his stick skills alone would not have made Dhyan a champion. In the team game that hockey is, Dhyan was also the perfect team man. As he ran up the field, in his mind it was like a chessboard. You know how in your classroom, you can tell just where each of your friends sit? You can point them out, often even without looking: “Kavya’s there. Romil’s over there.” That’s what hockey was like for Dhyan. Without looking, he knew exactly where his teammates were, and to which of them he could pass the ball.



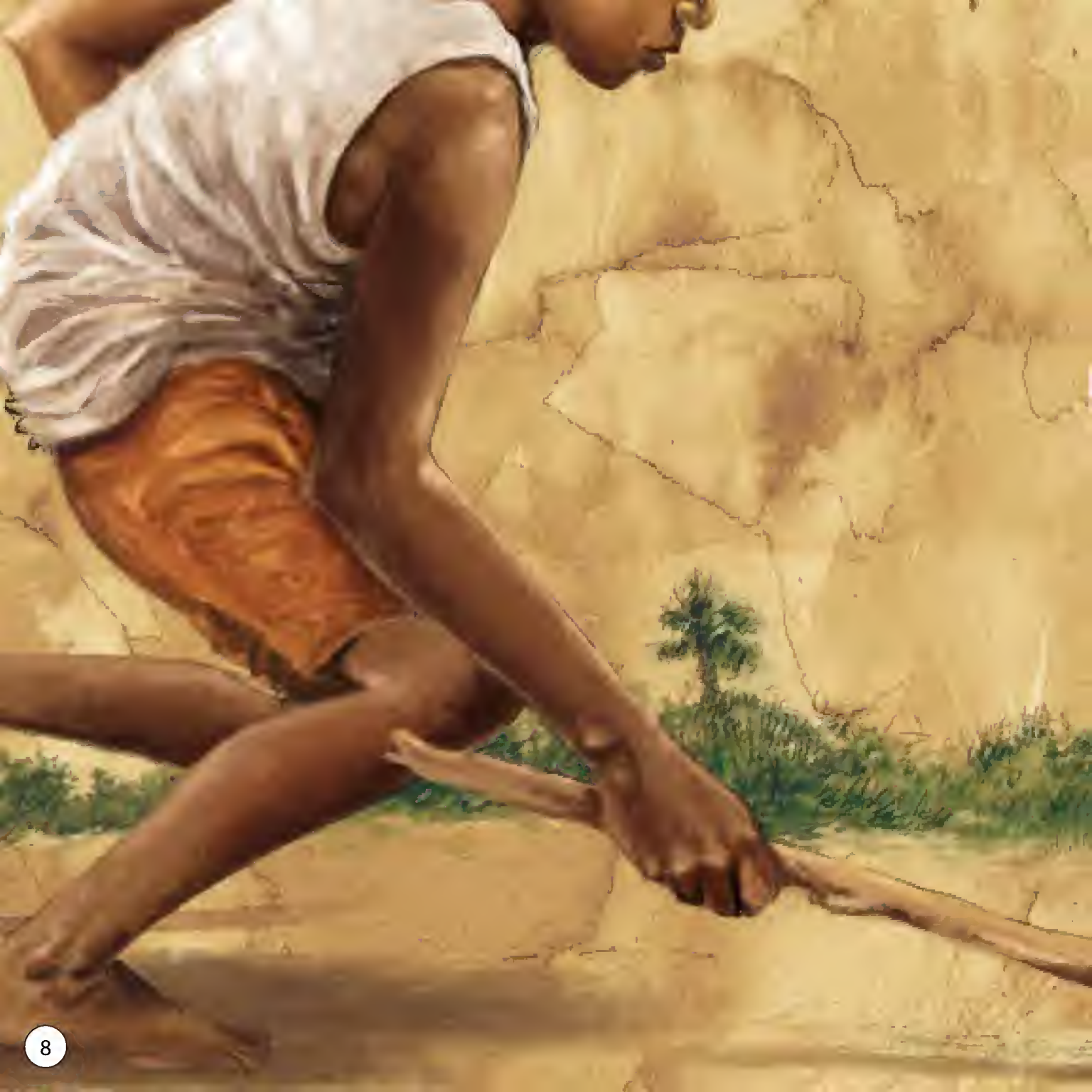


And those pinpoint passes only made him seem like even more of a magician. Long after he retired, he once explained his beautiful game: “The secret is both my hands, and also my mind and fitness routine.”

Talent is one thing, Dhyan meant to say with those words, and he knew he was blessed with hands wonderfully talented for hockey. But like all great sports stars, he also knew that what makes your talent count is the hard work you put in. To play as splendidly for as long as he did, he had to keep his body fit, his mind sharp.

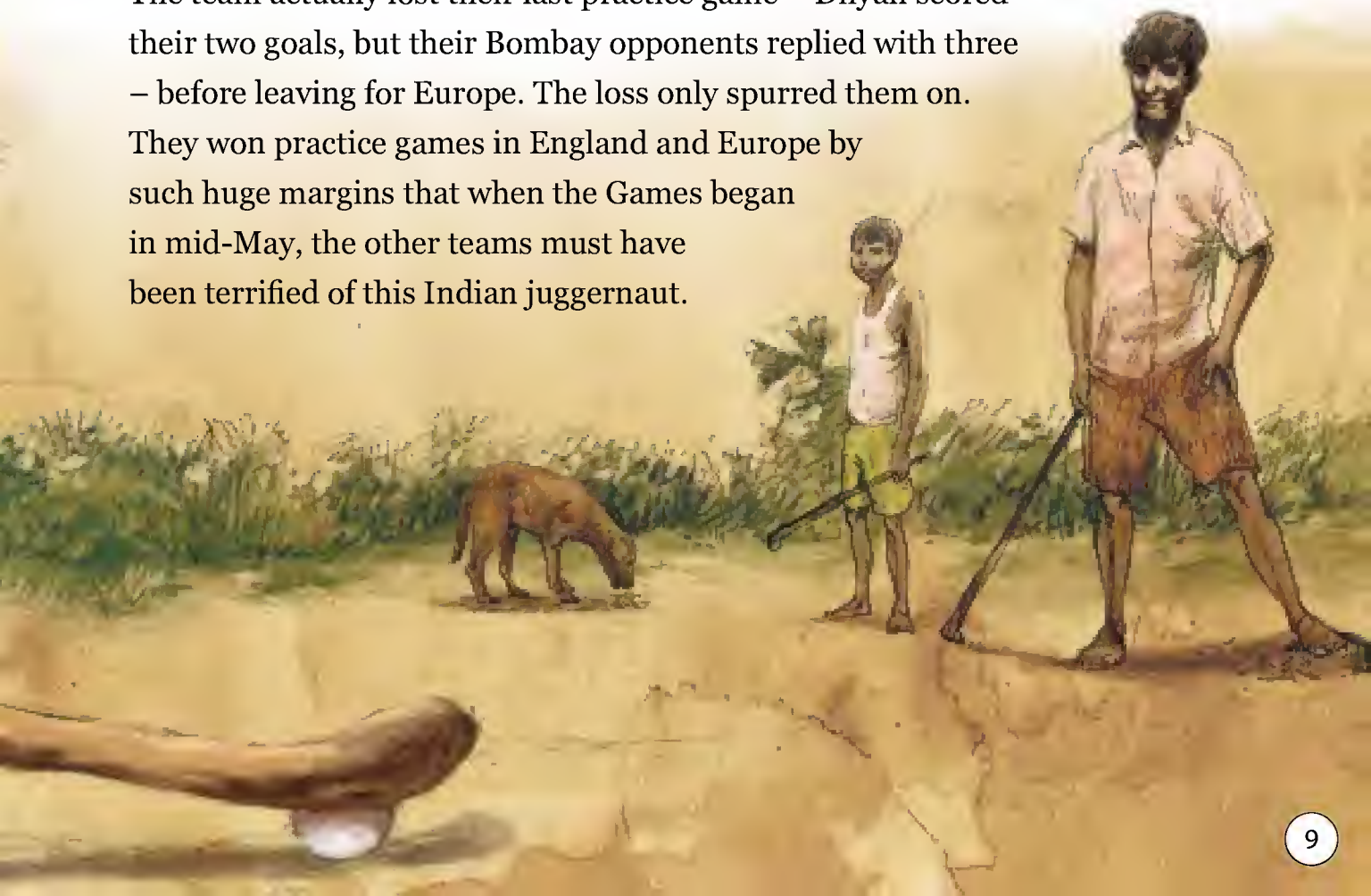
Dhyan’s father, Sameshwar Dutt Singh, served in the British Indian Army and played hockey as well. His eldest son, Dhyan, was born in Allahabad in 1905. From a young age, people said of him, he loved the milk sweet ‘rabri’. His mother made the creamy delight for him whenever she got a chance. Did that explain the supple wrists, the thighs like steel springs, that served him so well while playing hockey later in life? Maybe. But like all fond mothers do, she simply fed her growing son well, with no thought of what he might later become.

Transferred here and there throughout his career in the Army, Sameshwar Dutt could never ensure a steady education for his children. Only when the Government gave Sameshwar some land to build a house in Jhansi was he able to settle down. But by then, Dhyan had already dropped out of school, after just six years.



But though Dhyan wasn't in school in Jhansi, he took to his father's game with a passion. By the time he himself officially joined the Army at 16, Dhyan was already a fine player. By the mid-1920s, he was a rising star in Indian hockey. He toured New Zealand with an Army team in those years, helping them win 18 of their 21 games. Naturally, he was selected to the Indian team for the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics.

The team actually lost their last practice game – Dhyan scored their two goals, but their Bombay opponents replied with three – before leaving for Europe. The loss only spurred them on. They won practice games in England and Europe by such huge margins that when the Games began in mid-May, the other teams must have been terrified of this Indian juggernaut.



In Amsterdam, India thrashed Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Switzerland. In the final on May 26, India hammered the Netherlands. Dhyan and his team had sailed through the Olympics without giving up even one goal. Of their 29 goals, Dhyan scored 14. A local newspaper put it like this: “This is not a game of hockey, but magic. Dhyan Chand is in fact the magician of hockey.” And everyone who had ever seen the ball stick like glue to Dhyan’s flashing stick knew just what those words meant.



India had won the Olympic gold medal in hockey. And the best hockey player in the world, already, was this 22 year-old Indian wizard. Only three teams played hockey at the 1932 Olympics, in Los Angeles. India beat Japan and the USA, winning gold again.





Dhyan's younger brother Roop was also in the team by then, and together, the remarkable brothers scored 25 of India's 35 goals. This Indian team, an American journalist wrote, was "a typhoon out of the East". And the storm was just getting started. In their triumphant international tour of 1932, the Indian team played 37 games and scored 338 goals. Dhyan fired home 133 of those. In 1934, it was 48 games for 584 goals, Dhyan 201.

And then came the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Germany was then in the early years of Nazi rule, under Adolf Hitler. Hitler believed that Germans were superior in every way to the rest of the world. In the years to come, he would translate that belief into some of the most horrible slaughter mankind has ever known. But in 1936, Hitler saw the Berlin Olympics as his first great chance to show off his twisted ideas to his country and the world.

But Hitler's plan didn't work very well, and that's partly because of Dhyan and the Indian hockey team. For the typhoon out of the East hadn't slowed at all. India brushed aside Hungary, the USA, Japan and France to reach the final. Never mind, thought Hitler, Germany had also reached the final and would show these little brown upstarts from the East their place. And Germany actually scored a goal in the final, which was one goal more than those other four countries, combined, had managed against India.

Trouble was, India scored eight. What must Adolf Hitler have thought? What did this debacle do for his notions of German supremacy?

Another Olympic gold for India. Many more goals for Dhyan. He was a superstar now, the Roger Federer or Rahul Dravid of his time, celebrated in India and known wherever hockey was played.

Yet with all those years of brilliance around the world, Dhyan himself considered his best match to be the final of the 1933 Beighton Cup, an Indian tournament. Playing for his hometown Jhansi Heroes, he sent a long pass to a teammate, Ismail. As Dhyan later said, Ismail “ran with Jesse Owens’ speed half the length of the ground” and then scored the only goal of the match.

Always, what mattered most to Dhyan was teamwork. And perhaps his mention of Owens — the great runner whose Berlin medals also proved how twisted Hitler’s ideas were — is an indication of how much the Olympics meant to Dhyan.





Dhyan retired from the Army in 1956, as a Major. That year, India honoured him with the Padma Bhushan award. He was then appointed Chief Hockey Coach at the National Institute of Sports in Patiala. He coached there and at various camps around the country for many years. He was delighted that his son Ashok Kumar carried on the family's tradition of playing hockey.

A world-class hockey player himself who had inherited some of his father's dazzling skills, Ashok scored the goal that won India the World Cup in 1975. Sadly, by then India was already in decline as a hockey power; that World Cup was almost the last major world title India ever won. The retired Major, with his many memories of glorious hockey triumphs, never came to terms with how India was now struggling to compete with the world in the game he so loved. When India finished a dismal sixth at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, Dhyan lamented, “Kabhi nahin socha tha aisa din dekhna padega,” (I never thought I'd have to see such a day).

Dhyan Chand spent his last years in his beloved Jhansi. Residents would often see the great man about town, going to the market or visiting friends or running errands on a sturdy bicycle. He died in hospital in New Delhi on December 3, 1979. He was cremated, with full military honours, at the Jhansi Heroes ground.

Today, we celebrate his birthday, August 29, as our National Sports Day, and India's highest award for lifetime achievement in sports, the Dhyan Chand Award, is named after him. If ever India becomes a powerhouse in sports, we can say we owe it to the inspiration of this man. This magician, who once played hockey that thrilled the world.

This legend, born under an Indian full moon.



Dhyan Chand's India at the Olympics

1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, The Netherlands

India-Austria: 6-0

India-Belgium: 9-0

India-Denmark: 5-0

India-Switzerland: 6-0

India-Netherlands: 3-0

1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, United States of America

India-Japan: 11-1

India-USA: 24-1

1936 Olympics, Berlin, Germany

India-Hungary: 4-0

India-USA: 7-0

India-Japan: 9-0

India-France: 10-0







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Trained in computer science Dilip spent many years in software. Then he tried writing. He has won several awards (Outlook/Picador prize, Newsweek/Daily Beast prize, Wolfson College Press Fellowship) and has written for *Caravan*, *Hindustan Times*, *NYT* and *Newsweek*. He writes on mathematics for *Mint*. He lives in Mumbai with wife Vibha, children Sahir and Surabhi. Cats Aziz and Cleo rule.



Mohit Suneja is trained in Applied Art from the College of Art, Delhi where he is presently an assistant professor. As a freelancer he has worked with many leading advertising agencies, publishing houses, design houses, and independent authors. He is also involved with pre-production for animation and ad films. He enjoys travelling and photography, and loves to play his flute on cloudy days.

The man who came to be called the Wizard of Hockey, Dhyan Chand, started playing hockey with a branch of a palm tree. What did he like to eat as a child? How did he prove Hitler wrong? Here is the story of a man who might just inspire you to pick up a hockey stick and play.

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3



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